

Donna Dennis. *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 408 pp.; ISBN 0674032837

In her first book, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York*, Donna Dennis explores the rise of New York City's erotic book industry in the Nineteenth-Century and the subsequent rise of obscenity regulation on the state and national levels. A professor of law at Rutgers, Dennis has a background in both history and law, as well as experience practicing law in corporate governance and securities litigation and enforcement. This unusual training contributes to the multi-faceted perspective on the history and rise of the erotic book industry in New York and its regulation, or failed attempts at same. The introduction explains, "the world of obscenity law and the domain of erotic publishing influenced, sustained, and promoted each other during the formative periods of their development in the United States. Again and again, prohibitions against obscenity gave rise to innovative ways of creating, marketing, and distributing pornography" (11). This is a tale of the symbiotic relationship between pornography and legislation designed to curtail it, with a moral, still applicable to current efforts aimed at, for example, curtailing the film industry.

*Licentious Gotham* presents appropriate materials chronologically explaining how the erotic publishing industry moved from one in which most books were imported or reprinted from European sources, such as the famous *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Fanny Hill)* by John Cleland, to one with various innovative forms, like "flash weeklies", inexpensive erotic newspapers, and more 'traditional forms' like "fancy" books and "racy pamphlets". Along the way, she also aptly explains those changes in the legal and political climate that caused prosecutions to increase, and in response motivated development of different forms of publications. The book then turns its focus to the 1842 national ban on the importation of "'indecent and obscene' pictures" (27), which pushed the erotic book industry to publish and compose more of their own works, thereby "'naturalizing' obscene literature in the United States" and innovating the means by which it was distributed, through the postal system (142). This in turn propagated several new laws, specifically the Obscene Literature Act of 1868 and the Comstock Act of 1873, which moved the censure of obscene texts from the local and state level to the national level. All the while, Dennis highlights that "the obscenity taboo dramatically increased the sheer volume of sexual discourse that was commercially available in the city." (117). She concludes by leading the reader into the Twentieth-Century and the innovations of photography that change the industry once again.

The multiple perspective from which the tale unfolds allows the reader to experience not only the drama played out in the courtroom, as a legal analysis would provide, but also a behind the scenes look at information only a historian could unearth. The book is meticulously researched providing a great deal of evidence for each claim asserted. The extensive legal analysis may at times be dry to the average reader, but it is explained and analyzed in an accessible way for non-legal specialists. At the same time, Dennis limits projections, admitting when there is insufficient evidence or no records to further her analysis. Dennis also brings a human component to the political and legal discussion with vivid, yet restrained and truthful, descriptions of the important players on

both sides. Her portrait of Anthony Comstock as deeply devout crusader willing to go to extreme lengths to censor obscene works is particularly worthy of note.

*Licentious Gotham* also analyzes the literature itself, exploring the text and the images that are often key in erotic texts. Although we no longer have any remaining copies of many works, she pieces together scenes from court records to illustrate the content of these texts. Her analysis of women's agency within the erotic literature is especially interesting. She shows that "By inverting cultural norms of passivity and 'passionlessness' for middle-class wives and defying legal prohibitions on depictions of erotic knowledge and assertiveness among women, stories...provided Akarman's customers with a delicious thrill of transgression." (179). The many figures in each chapter, which include title pages, circulars, maps, and erotic and regular illustrations, are useful to the non-specialist reader, especially the erotic illustrations which differ greatly from pornography today. For example, the engraving "Lola and Young Stanhope in the Cable Tier" from *Venus Miscellany*, depicts a woman and man kissing in the hull of the ship, fully clothed except for Lola's exposed breasts; an image which is hardly your modern day Playboy spread (172). *Licentious Gotham* literary, visual, political, and legal appeal make it appropriate for many fields of study, from literature and history to law, and even possibly for the more general reader.

Dennis's distinctive analysis reveals aspects of this saga that will intrigue the modern reader, particularly the surprising defense strategies employed by the merchants and publishers of erotic texts. Such strategies vary from complete evasion of charges to justification of the literature as a moral warning. Shockingly none of these publishers invoked freedom of speech as a defense like their Twentieth-Century successors. Dennis also illuminates the surprising role of women in the erotic book trade; women functioned as accomplices to their husbands, true figures in the trade, and consumers in many instances. For example women reader wrote to the *Venus Miscellany* detailing sexual experiences and asking for advice from other female readers (176-179). This aspect, coupled with the discussion of women's agency is an unexpected side to this book that forces reader to rethink modern stereotypes.

In entirety, *Licentious Gotham* is a comprehensive and intriguing look at the erotic book publishing industry of New York City. While important for Nineteenth-century scholars, it is also useful when considering the recent stories of censure in the United States founded on this history. Full of the expected legal and political analysis, it also entertains the reader with tidbits from the erotic texts and challenges the reader to look at this industry from different perspectives, such as the woman's.

April E. Stevens  
Vanderbilt University